Claims

1)   Apparatus for providing a private virtual room within which two or more parties can communicate electronically, the apparatus comprising means for receiving a request from at least one party to provide said virtual room, said request including information regarding the proposed purpose of said virtual room, the apparatus further comprising means for verifying the legitimacy of said proposed purpose and providing said virtual room only if said proposed purpose meets one or more predetermined criteria.

2)   Apparatus according to claim 1, comprising means for receiving a request from at least one party to enter said virtual room, means for defining predetermined criteria for entry into said virtual room, and means for permitting a party to enter said virtual room only if said party satisfies said predetermined common criteria.

3)   Apparatus according to claim 1, comprising means for running said virtual room within its own physically and logically protected computing environment.

4)   Apparatus according to claim 3, comprising means for verifying the integrity of data within the or each said environment.

5)   A server programmed for providing a private virtual room within which two or more parties can communicate electronically, the server being programmed on receiving a request from at least one party to provide a virtual room, wherein said request includes information specifiying a proposed purpose of said virtual room, to verify the legitimacy of said proposed purpose and to provide said virtual room only if said proposed purpose meets one or more predetermined criteria.

6)   Apparatus according to claim 5, comprising means for receiving a request from at least one party to enter said virtual room, means for defining predetermined criteria for entry into said virtual room, and means for permitting a party to enter said virtual room only if said party satisfies said predetermined common criteria.

7)   Apparatus according to claim 5, comprising means for running said virtual room within its own physically and logically protected computing environment.

8)   Apparatus according to claim 7, comprising means for verifying the integrity of data within the or each said environment.

9)   Apparatus for providing a private virtual room within which two or more parties can communicate electronically, the apparatus comprising means for providing at least one virtual room and for running said virtual within its own physically and logically protected computing environment, and means for verifying the integrity of data within the or each said environment.

10)   Apparatus according to claim 1, comprising means for determining if a user computing platform includes a logically and physically protected computing environment.

11)   Apparatus according to claim 1, adapted to provide a plurality of private virtual rooms upon demand, each of the virtual rooms being run in a logically and physically protected computing environment.

12)   Apparatus according to claim 11, arranged such that only encrypted data is permitted to enter or leave a logically and physically protected computing environment.

13)   Apparatus according to claim 12, comprising encryption means for encrypting data entering or leaving a

logically and physically protected computing environment, the apparatus being arranged such that the data can only be decrypted with permission of said apparatus.

5 14) Apparatus according to claim 1 including means for performing integrity checks on its hardware and software environment prior to providing a private virtual room, and only setting up such a virtual room if the environment is determined to the suitable.

10

15) Apparatus according to claim 1, comprising means for performing integrity checks on its software environment while a private virtual room is in use.

15 16) Apparatus according to claim 2, comprising means for displaying or otherwise providing details of one or more attributes of a user of a private virtual room to other users of the virtual room.

20 17) Apparatus according to claim 1, comprising means for producing logs of the communication or interaction taking place within a private virtual room and storing the logs in a protected storage means.

25 18) Apparatus according to claim 17, wherein said logs are stored using a key known only to the apparatus.

19) A method of providing a private virtual room within which two or more parties can communicate electronically, 30 the method comprising the following steps: one party issues a request to a service provider to provide a virtual room, the request including information regarding the proposed purpose of the virtual room; the service provider verifies the legitimacy of the proposed purpose; 35 and the service provider provides the virtual room only if the proposed purpose meets one or more predetermined criteria.

20) A method according to claim 19, further comprising the following steps: the service provider establishes criteria for entry into said virtual room; a party requests entry to the virtual room from the service
5 provider; and the service provider permits the party to enter the virtual room only if said party satisfies said established criteria for entry.

21) A method according to claim 20, wherein the criteria
10 for entry are established by the request to provide a virtual room.

22) A method according to claim 20, wherein the criteria for entry are established in accordance with predetermined
15 criteria for the proposed purpose of the virtual room.

23) A method according to claim 19, comprising the step of running said virtual room within its own physically and logically protected computing environment.
20
24) A method according to claim 23, including the step of verifying the integrity of data within the or each said environment.

25 25) A method as claimed in claim 19, wherein the request comprises a user-specified purpose for the virtual room.

26) A method of providing a private virtual room within which two or more parties can communicate electronically,
30 the method comprising the steps of a service provider providing at least one virtual room and running virtual room within its own physically and logically protected computing environment, and the service provider verifying the integrity of data within the or each said environment.
35
27) A method according to claim 26, further comprising the step of one party requesting the service provider to provide said virtual room, said request including

information regarding the proposed purpose of said virtual room, the service provider verifying the legitimacy of said proposed purpose and providing said virtual room only if said proposed purpose meets one or more predetermined
5 criteria.

28) A method according to claim 16, further comprising the steps of a party requesting the service provider to allow that party to enter said virtual room, the service
10 provider defining criteria for entry into said virtual room, and permitting the party to enter said virtual room only if the party satisfies said predetermined common criteria.

15 29) A method according to claim 19, comprising the step of determining if a user computing platform includes a logically and physically protected computing environment.

30) A method according to claim 19, further comprising
20 the steps of performing integrity checks on the hardware and software environment prior to providing a requested private virtual room, and only setting up such a virtual room if the environment is determined to be suitable.

25 31) A method according to claim 19, further comprising the step of performing integrity checks on the software environment while a private virtual room is in use.

32) A method according to claim 20, further comprising
30 the step of displaying or otherwise providing details of one or more attributes of a user of a private virtual room to other users of the virtual room.

33) A method according to claim 19, further comprising
35 the step of producing logs of the communication or interaction taking place within a private virtual room and storing the logs in a protected storage means.